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AUTHOR Zimecki, Michael W.
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ABSTRACT

It is possible to reconcile two supposedly warring viewpoints toward composition pedagogy: that writers know what they want to say before they begin writing (a viewpoint that stresses the communicative function of writing), and that writers discover what they have to say in the act of saying it (a viewpoint that focuses on the heuristic value of writing). Both positions contain a large measure of truth and can be used to advantage by the same writer in the same composition. Knowing writing techniques before beginning to write, such as repeating thematic tags to hold the reader's attention, must be the result of intellectual processes, as well as the application of a rule. Having a working knowledge of principles of contrast, classification and causation and of rules of implication is important before beginning to write, but such knowledge merely underlies those operations a writer makes when using verbal cues to expand an initial set of sentences, generating further sentences while organically structuring a composition. Basic principles of deduction and hypothesis-making help writers produce more intelligible compositions only if these principles are taught in a flexible way. This theory of composition pedagogy may facilitate a greater appreciation of literature by helping students understand key words, grasp implications, shun cliches, and recognize passages in which authors use stock situations to capitalize on standard emotions and beliefs. (AEA)

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TWO HERESIES OF COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

Michael W. Zimecki
University of Alabama in Huntsville

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Abstract

Two global views dominate our conception of writing. Stressing the personal character of experience, one promotes the heuristic value of writing while the other, emphasizing the public nature of expression, promotes the goal of communicative efficiency. These two views are seen in conflict. In this paper, I propose that the heuristic value and communicative function of writing are different but not dissimilar, distinct but inseparable: readable prose is the outcome of intellectual processes which can be made explicit in the form of reusable procedures.

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TWO HERESIES OF COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

There are two heresies of composition pedagogy. By this I mean that two global views or philosophic positions dominate our conception of writing: each appeals to common sense and finds some support from empirical research - each contains a measure of truth. They are heretical in the sense that they are mutually opposed: each denies the insights offered by the other. Following a brief exposition of these two views, I will propose a reconciliation, one which aims at coalition rather than eclecticism, one suggestive of strategies for composition teaching.

The first heresy may be succinctly described. It consists of the view that a writer knows what he means, but confronts the problem of how to say it. In this view, the content of discourse is ready at hand: the writer has subject matter knowledge or some specialized expertise that he must adapt to a social context in order to achieve some pragmatic goal. The writer of letters, memos, reports, academic papers and school essays confronts the task of translating knowledge for a reader, one who wants the message, not the history of its acquisition. So conceived, writing requires mastery of principles of arrangement and adherence to standards of correctness: good writing is unembellished style.

The second heresy maintains, conversely, that a writer discovers what he has to say in the act of saying it. In this view, the content of discourse evolves: the writer acquires a final grasp of his thesis after a series of halting attempts to formulate and refine an intuitive but impalpable need. The writer of memoirs, diaries, informal essays and stories is engaged in an act of awareness, a process which involves

the construction of self, the actualization of seminal impulses. So conceived, writing includes three basic elements: an ascesis (or warm-up exercises), to render the writer well-disposed in his search; a set of procedures for creating ideas; and, lastly, an understanding of the principle of organic development.

Proponents of this second global view emphasize the heuristic value of writing while those of the first insist on its communicative function. The attempt to define writing in terms of communication exclusively meets the objection that it stresses a rote practicality at the expense of experiential learning, placing an unduly high premium on the composed product while failing to acknowledge the pedagogic uses of trial and error. Critics observe that " you can't write writing, " that, as D. Gordon Rohman maintains, the dynamics of conceptualizing inform the rhetoric of the finished page. Stressing the private character of thought, critics express the fear that the goal of neutral statement will obscure the importance of metaphoric language, divorcing critical reading from writing, the study of literature from the study of composition. But words, as Aristotle said, are the symbols of mental experience.

Proponents of the first view counter that those who celebrate the heuristic value of writing ignore the exigencies of daily communication, forgetting that the rules of grammar, the demands of readers and the pressures of time constrain a writer's need for expressiveness more than any pedagogy can. A discovery pedagogy, they maintain, tends to treat writing as an end in itself, exempting the product of writing from critical scrutiny - one consequence of a preference for the subjective and personal voice over the objective and communal voice. But rhetoric, as Aristotle

also said, finds its end in judgment, and the ultimate test of the effectiveness of any process depends upon the response of intelligent but impatient readers to a writer's finished words.

These two positions are polar and antagonistic. Are they unbridgeable?

I think not. A reconciliation is possible if one acknowledges that both positions contain a large measure of truth, but neither, as D. H. Lawrence once said in another context, quite " captures the whole hog. " Consider, for example, the goal of writing readable prose implicit in the communication pedagogy. In his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Cassirer observed that we habitually employ a psychological device in apprehending blocks of information: we isolate a part (or use a short symbol) in order to represent the whole, a procedure which enables us to deal with complexities that we could not otherwise attend to all at once. The view that meaning is acquired bit by bit is, of course, consonant with the position held by those who proclaim the importance of discovery procedures, holding that a writer inducts from part to whole as he constructs his text. In his recent Philosophy of Composition, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has attempted to show that Cassirer's principle of representation is applicable to discussions of readable prose. Since Hirsch subscribes to the time-honored maxim that writing is meant to be read, that it is an instrument in the service of communication, his views are relevant here.

Briefly, Hirsch contends that a writer has a fundamental obligation to hold and control a reader's attention from one group of words to the next and over still longer stretches of discourse comprising many sentences. After acknowledging that an uninterested reader's mind is sometimes beyond

the control of the best writers, Hirsch goes on to say that a universal principle of attention-holding is thematic focus. To avoid wasteful attention shifts, the verbal theme of one phrase should be similar to the theme of the preceding phrase. The expectancies set up by one phrase, sentence or group of sentences should be fulfilled in the next.

Attention-holding is possible if a writer assists his reader by repeating a small number of thematic tags, words or groups of words which represent the holistic meaning remembered and expected by a reader. A thematic tag, that is, is an explicit verbal representation of those meanings a writer introduces into his text, and so long as they are not too numerous they aid the reader in inducting from part to whole as a text unfolds. They help to summarize and to point afresh.

An example is called for. In the Philosophy of Composition, Hirsch contrasts the opening paragraph from an unedited letter from a student newspaper with a revised, more readable version which exploits thematic tags without changing the content of the original passage or reducing the number of words:

> Dear Sir:
>
> The article in yesterday's issue has prompted us to offer a clarification of our actions. We hope to eliminate any confusion which might have developed as a result of the strong similarity between our campaign literature and that used by the current administration in last year's election.

And here is the revision.

> Dear Sir:
>
> Your article, published yesterday, demonstrated a strong similarity between the wording of our campaign literature and the wording of the campaign literature used by the winners of last year's election. Publication of your article now prompts us to explain why we used similar wording in our campaign.

Hirsch maintains that the repetition of the words " campaign," "wording "

and " article " helps place the writer's message in sharper focus; hence decreasing comprehension-time for a reader. If these advantages are undetectable in a quick reading of two short passages, it should be observed that Hirsch's contention finds support in empirical research. In 1973, the cognitive psychologist Walter Kintsch reported that, with prose passages of equal length and equal word- and sentence-difficulty, both reading rate and retention could be predicted from a quantitative analysis of content. Kintsch found, that is, that comprehension time decreased for those passages which repeated a few tags many times.

The effective use of thematic tags is no mere matter of repetition, of course. Before I left for Huntsville, my wife, an industrial editor, showed me a letter she was asked to rewrite for a manager. The manager's letter began:

> I was thinking about telling you about our company's Explorer's program and in this letter I thought I would like to explore my thoughts with you.

Perseveration of ideas, indicated here by the repetition of the words " thought " and " explore " is an earmark of wasteful prose. The manager went on to introduce several other"thematic tags," using the words " ideas " and " interested " over a dozen times in four short paragraphs. Hirsch notes that too many tags repeated too soon decrease readability, but it is perhaps simpler to say that <u>strategic</u> repetition involves more than rote application of principles. The novice can usually be expected to take the spirit of a maxim and reduce it to its letter.

Research in psycholinguistics indicates that Hirsch's maxim is a sound one, one which can aid in the assessment of writing, but that the effective use of thematic tags is the result of intellectual processes, not rote application of a rule. In an interesting series of experiments, R. M. Dawes

demonstrated the effects of thinking about particular semantic relations present in a sample text: subjects were asked to listen to a reading of the sample text and then to produce a written representation of it that would be used to aid recall in subsequent tasks. The researcher found that those subjects who performed best on later tasks had structured their compositions after noting key words and schematically treating relations between them. This process went beyond outlining and involved the use of inferential procedures. Treating words as concepts or classes, those subjects employed a categorical system, subsuming their short-hand propositions under some classes, excluding them from others. They employed procedures of an " informal logic. "

These procedures involve a working knowledge of principles of contrast, classification and causation, rules of implication and rules of thumb which enable us to understand the presuppositions of sentences - the relations between utterance and utterance-context. To describe them fully would require a syllabus. Here, let it suffice to say that they underlie those operations a writer makes when he uses verbal cues to expand upon an initial set of sentences - the verbal instructions of an assignment or those first halting words he puts on paper - generating further sentences while he organically structures his composition. Not all writers make conscious use of these procedures, nor need to, but the novice can become aware of them and learn to use them in productive ways.

For example, the novice writer can learn to use a set of questions - the journalist's " Who? What? When? Where? and Why? ", say, or the more elaborate heuristic matrix presented by Richard Young, et. al., in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change - using the set to formulate a working hypothesis or to help in refining one. Experience tells us that the novice can often

produce a number of unrelated or even contradictory examples when asked to support a thesis; our experience is confirmed by research which indicates that, in practical reasoning tasks, most individuals search for evidence that will verify their hypothesis, ignoring negative cases, a strategy which often leads to wrong conclusions. In The Psychology of Reasoning, P. C. Wason and P. N. Johnson-Laird reported that those individuals who vary their hypotheses to accomodate available data, neither trying to confirm or to falsify it in a deliberate way, are most successful at discovering a correct solution. Conceivably, they would also be more effective at presenting it as well. Lee Odell reports that students who consciously use discovery procedures in their writing produce compositions that are more mature, more carefully thought out, more persuasive.

Odell's research suggests that the heuristic value and the communicative function of writing are not opposed; they are different aspects of the same activity. If this holds true, it is because most of the thinking we do is mediated by language; writing is an instrument for making thought public, accessible to others, but the act of writing may also facilitate thinking, enabling it to be more complex, efficient and accurate. This dual role of language explains why the " natural logic " employed by essayists, novelists and poets is inevitably richer than the formal calculus set down by mathematical logicians. As Janet Dean Fodor has put it in her book on Semantics, " a [generative] grammar for a natural language is . . . similar to a system of formal logic, " but " particular logical forms . . . fail to make semantic distinctions " that a natural language can capture. Just as understanding of Hirsch's maxim may help student writers apply criteria of good writing, so too, basic principles of deduction and hypothesis-making may help writers produce more intelligible compositions; but only if these

principles are taught in a flexible way.

Although logical deduction, for example, can be taught in a mechanical way, this is not true for " natural deduction " - the kind evidenced, for instance, when Edith Effron begins an essay with the title " The Soaps: Definitely Not 99 and 44/100 Percent Pure " and then goes on to describe the salacious themes of daytime television, or when E. D. Hirsch alludes to Poe's aesthetic essay in a book devoted to a pragmatic philosophy of composition. In both cases, a phrase usually understood one way is used to encapsulate new meaning. My reference to flexibility implies that exposure to poems, parables, stories and riddles may help students gain mastery of composition.

Earlier in this presentation, I noted the fears that a communication pedagogy is exclusive of literary study. Permit me to move to a close by observing that if the heuristic value and the communicative function of writing are different but not dissimilar, distinct but inseparable, then literature may serve an important role in the writing classroom, just as instruction in writing may facilitate greater appreciation of literature. In his study of the response of fifty-two college-bound high school students to four selected short stories, James Squire found that their failure to grasp meaning derived from misunderstanding of key words and difficulty in grasping implications - from incorrect inferences. Squire wrote:

> Of all the distortions and misconceptions of literature occurring throughout the transcripts, one of the more distressing is the wide-spread reliance of the majority of adolescents on familiar and stereotyped patterns of thinking as they interpret situations in literature . . . The reliance of readers on such trite and commonplace ideas as a substitute for their own thinking must be deplored . . . . Two problems for education thus become apparent: Readers must learn to guard against relying on cliches as substitutes for thinking and readers

> must develop an ability to identify passages in which authors use stock situations to capitalize on standard emotions and beliefs.

If instruction in writing encourages students to shun cliched reactions and gain rational control of feelings, that instruction can yoke communication and thinking, unite the communal voice with the personal voice, encourage the marriage of composition and literature.

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